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# **Outsiders Within**

**Women in Management in the Public Service in  
Aotearoa/New Zealand**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Management**

**at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the management practices of a small number of women in management positions within a large government department in New Zealand, and the factors influencing those practices. Using a feminist standpoint epistemology the study took as its starting point the day to day experiences of managers and their staff.

Through analysis of these experiences the context of New Public Management and the reforms of the public sector in New Zealand that took place in the 1980's and 1990's were identified as important features in the management practices of the participants.

The study found that the doctrines of New Public Management were embedded within the organisation from which participants were drawn. Within this context, they had an organising or mediating effect on the day to day management practices of the participants, what they valued, how they perceived management and the language they used to talk of their experiences. Overall the participants did not consider that gender relations created either supports or constraints to their management practices or their entry into management positions. They considered that gender-related constraints were a thing of the past. They did, however, note particular events that suggested that women managers continue to be judged in relation to deeply held gender stereotypes.

The management practices that the participants valued and/or described as their own practice did not conform to the gendered dichotomies of management that have been prevalent in the literature on successful management and women in management in particular. The participants demonstrated a more androgynous approach to management that is adaptive and sensitive to the wider context.

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## Chapter One - Introduction

This thesis explores the management practices of women in a large government department in Aotearoa/New Zealand and looks at the factors that influence those practices. Its genesis was in my own musings about managers in general, women managers in particular, my interest in feminism and a particular assignment I completed for an Organisation and Management paper in 2002. I have worked in the public sector off and on for over twenty years, gaining my first job in the Department of Social Welfare as a sixteen year old 'cadet'. During the years of most significant reform of New Zealand's public sector, the late 1980s to the early 1990s I was less engaged in paid work, doing part time work in the period until my son went to school and then joining a community organisation. So I re-entered a re-engineered public sector in the mid 1990s.

I began to encounter women in management positions in greater numbers, many I admired for the strength and tenacity they had needed to get there and their ability to foot it with the 'boys' and still support other women in the organisation. Others I observed withholding this support and seemingly making it difficult for women around them to advance. In 2002 I enrolled in the paper that led me to identify this topic. One of the assignments I completed asked students to debate the statement "Women's leadership styles are different to men's". This was my first foray into the literature around gendered management styles. I found, of course, that there were many debates on the topic resulting in positions ranging from 'there is no difference' to 'there is almost nothing but difference'. This focus on difference can be seen in the literature review that follows in Chapter Three. My on-going reading and still-developing understanding of different feminist theories and methodologies however, lead me to the position that 'difference' was not the place to start my research from. The lived experience of women managers from the location of gendered institutions (the public service, and the role of management) was that place. This position is influenced by many feminist theorists, but particularly Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock, Dorothy Smith and Nancy Naples who developed or subscribe to what has come to be known as feminist standpoint epistemology. 'Difference', of course, continues to shape the context in which women manage.



So, I set out to carry out research that did not start from 'difference'. I also sought to complement some of the New Zealand literature on women's management that had focused on the education field, for example Strachan (1997) and Court (2002) by looking at the public service. I considered how women managers in a large public service organisation view the role of manager and how they describe their own behaviour in that role. I also explored whether the managers perceived the organisational and societal environments to enable or constrain them in their role of manager. A small number of staff were included in the study to explore how they perceived their manager's approach to management and the specific behaviours they observed. Staff were also asked to comment on the contextual elements that they considered to be enabling or constraining their manager.

### ***Why focus on women's management practices?***

As noted above, there has been much management literature and debate focused on management styles, and particularly the differences between women and men as managers. Early trait theorists described the characteristics of managers as the characteristics of men. Therefore, managers, by definition were men, and more importantly, women, by definition, were not managers. As Wicks and Bradshaw point out:

*Historically, organisational research has been largely oblivious to issues of gender, assuming either that organisational arrangements impact men and women equally or that only the experiences of men matter since they occupy the majority of important jobs in formal organisations (2000, p. 1).*

Prior to the 1980s it was difficult to find a management or business text book or article that used anything but the male pronoun. Over the past twenty years there has been much debate over the existence of difference, the nature and cause of any difference, whether those differences identified are positive or negative and why we should care anyway. This rich debate is discussed more fully in the literature review in Chapter Three.

This debate has also occurred in New Zealand, although much of it has remained focused on examining the representation of women in management and the factors that have affected women's under-representation in senior positions. There has been some research into leadership approaches or practices, much of this has been carried out in the education sector, (Court, 2002; Hawk, 1997; Strachan, 1997).

New Zealand in the 21st century also provides an interesting context in which to study the management practices of women. The year 2003 saw the 110th anniversary of women gaining the vote, women's labour force participation has reached a high of 60.9% (Statistics New Zealand, 2005) and the four key constitutional positions, the Prime Minister, Governor General, Attorney General and Chief Justice are held by women.

### ***Why the public service?***

The public service is a setting that has provided some specific policies and practices that have influenced the numbers of women attaining management positions and the type of management styles that are valued. These include equal employment opportunity policies, family friendly work environments and a new focus on communication, transparency, integrity and trust in public management.

The New Zealand public sector also has a history that has been characterised by gender segregation across organisations. Women are under represented in advice giving departments such as the Treasury, and in the Departments of Corrections, Fisheries and Conservation. Women in the public service can be found predominantly in large service departments such as the Ministry of Social Development, the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Justice (Mintrom & True, 2004). I initially set out to draw participants from one female dominated and one male dominated organisation to allow a richer comparison of context to be made. This did not occur due to the difficulty experienced in gaining access to staff. The issue of access is discussed in more depth in Chapter Five.

The public sector has also undergone significant reform over recent years. The Labour Government that held office from 1984 to 1990 embarked on a radical programme of public sector reform which was carried on by the National government until 1999. The key elements were the splitting of commercial from non-commercial activities (Wallis, 2001) and a shedding of numbers in the public service. In 2001 the public service was around 37% of the size it had been in 1985 (Mintrom & True, 2004). Expectations are now that government agencies will be more open and responsive, will consult more and will adhere to an expressed set of values. This can be seen in documents such as the State Services Commission's Public Service Code of Conduct (State Services Commission, 2005b) and Development Goals for the State Services (State Services Commission, 2005c). These documents talk of the public service being accessible, coordinated and trusted and its employees having personal strength and courage, integrity and the ability to connect with people.

These factors mean that the New Zealand public service provided a unique opportunity to carry out a distinctly New Zealand study. Whilst the research did not seek to make any comparison to the management practices and approaches of women in the private sector, or to men, it will provide a basis from which this could be done in the future.

### ***Research questions***

This study set out to answer two key questions:

*What are the management practices of women in the public service in Aotearoa/New Zealand?*

and

*What are the factors that influence those practices?*

### ***Organisation of this thesis***

I have attempted in this thesis to use language that is accessible not only to academics, but also management practitioners, aware of the divide that often exists between these groups. I hope that I am following the trend identified by Barley, Meyer and Gash (1988) of the language of practitioners and academics converging and more importantly for me, that this influence is from the practitioner to the academic. I use the first person

pronoun throughout. This part of locating myself in the research (Leatherby, 2003) and acknowledging the role of the researcher as the producer of knowledge (Harding, 2004a; Naples, 2003; Smith, 1990a) and the potential power of that position. This thesis is necessarily partial and is constructed from within my own worldview.

In **Chapter Two** I provide some contextual background to women in the public service in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The increased participation of women in the workforce generally, and in the public service in particular, is discussed. I also outline the distribution of women within the public service in terms of their location in different departments and in managerial positions. I also discuss the gender pay gap as one of the important elements of the context in which women's management practices occur. A number of the participants in this study raised remuneration as the one area where they feel they are discriminated against. In Chapter Two I have also included an introduction to the public sector, the reforms it has undergone, the 1990's focus on efficiency and the current focus on increasing capability, transparency and trust.

**Chapter Three** contains my review and analysis of literature on women in management. I begin by discussing how the study of management has historically defined it as a masculine pursuit that either excluded women all together or put pressure on them to behave 'like men' in order to be perceived as successful. I then explore how researchers have approached investigations of women's management and leadership styles. Many looking for, and finding, significant differences between the way men and women approached leadership. Other researchers finding more within-group difference. I then present a discussion on androgynous leadership as an alternative to the masculine/feminine divide. Issues of cultural difference and the importance of context are raised as part of the critique of the literature.

In **Chapter Four** I outline my journey through feminist theories to my decision to begin this study from feminist standpoint position and to include an analysis of discourses occurring within the organisation the participants worked in as part of the context of their management practices. I also examine the ethical questions I needed to consider in carrying out this research from a feminist position.

**Chapter Five** presents the design of the study and outlines how I went about gaining access to organisations and collecting and analysing the data.

In **Chapter Six** I present my analysis of the participants' responses in relation to the doctrines of New Public Management (NPM). This chapter developed out of what I initially thought to be one of many influences on the participants' management practices. Because of the strength of the impact of NPM on management practices that was evident in the data, this evolved into one of the major findings of the study. In this chapter the impact of discourses of NPM on the day to day activities of participants is presented. These discourses include strategic planning, the focus on effectiveness and efficiency, managing performance, customer focus and mechanisms of control. The participants' unquestioning acceptance of and involvement in the discourse of public management is discussed.

**Chapter Seven** presents the themes that emerged from my initial content analysis. In this chapter the management practices and styles, as reported by participants, are presented and related to the literature discussed in Chapter Three. I also discuss two influencing factors on the management practices of participants. The first is the influence of role models through exhibiting both behaviours participants wanted to emulate and those they did not. Secondly I look at gender as a potential influence within the organisational culture.

In **Chapter Eight** I conclude the analysis with comment on whether the participants conceive themselves as insiders or outsiders in relation to the role of management, gender and the doctrines of New Public Management.

**Chapter Nine** concludes this discussion with implications and opportunities for future research.